

The True Love

Meanwhile, Athena raced through the temple corridors.
Ahead of her, she caught sight of the mummies carrying Pharaoh as they disappeared around a corner.
As Athena rounded the corner, a vast natural dome opened before her, carved from reddish-brown rock.
She looked up.
Brilliant sunlight streamed through a small opening high above, pouring onto the raised altar beyond the stone floor...
...where Ilvana and Pharaoh stood bathed in its light.

"Welcome... I have been waiting for you."
Ilvana spread her arms, a gentle smile touching her lips.
"What are you planning...?"
"Hohoho... You needn't have brought an army. I never intended to harm you... after all, I love you."
"Then will you lift the curse?"
"Of course... if you'll stay here with me forever."
"And if I refuse?"
"Ahahaha... Then I shall do nothing at all. We shall simply journey together to the Land of the Dead. After all... that is where I came from in the first place."
"Who... sent you there?"
"That no longer matters. Tell me... what will you choose?"
"I..."
Pharaoh slowly drew the dagger hidden beneath his robe.
One of the serpents coiled upon Ilvana's head narrowed its eyes.
"Look out! He's going to strike!"
Ilvana caught Pharaoh's wrist before he could move.
Drawing close, she gently guided the dagger back toward his throat.
"If this... is your answer..."
Tears welled in Ilvana's eyes and slipped silently down her cheeks.
"If only you would become a soul... If only then you could see what true love is..."
"Don't be afraid. We'll be together very soon."
"No!"
Just as Ilvana turned Pharaoh's own blade toward his throat, Athena threw herself between

them.

"Please, don't! The real you would never do this... You gave your own life to save him."

"P-Princess Athena... what do you mean?"

Pharaoh gasped.

"Remember who you truly are... Ashendra."

Athena gently placed a hand upon her arm.

"Silence...! Silence! I..."

Ilvana's eyes darted wildly.

Her fingers loosened... and the dagger slipped from her grasp.

"Are you... Ashendra?"

Pharaoh reached out and caught her shoulder as she turned to flee.

"Ah... aaah..."

Covering her face with trembling hands, Ilvana let out a broken cry and collapsed to her knees.

Pharaoh knelt beside her.

He took her trembling hands in his.

Looking gently into her eyes, he smiled.

"Though I can no longer see your beautiful silver hair... those beloved gray eyes have never changed. They're still you."

Pharaoh gently stroked her forehead. With his fingers, he brushed aside the serpents upon her head as though combing her hair. He cupped her neck, drew her close, and pressed his lips to hers.

A radiance far brighter than the sunlight pouring into the temple enveloped both Pharaoh and Ilvana.

Ilvana's true form was restored.

The Serpent King's captive children slipped free and fled across the stone floor.

Long, shimmering silver hair cascaded to her waist once more.

Tears overflowed from her gentle gray eyes.

"You... were alive..."

The dark circles beneath Pharaoh's eyes had vanished.

The color had returned to his face.

Ashendra gently shook her head.

"No..., the curse merely held me here. I can exist only within this temple. Now that the curse has been broken... it won't be long before I'm called back to the Land of the Dead."

"But... we've only just found each other..."

Ashendra softly shook her head once more.

"Then let us be grateful that fate has granted us this one last meeting... and the chance to say goodbye."

"Um... pardon me."

Athena lowered her voice as she stepped hesitantly between them.

"I-I'm sorry, but... will my curse be lifted too?"

Ashendra turned to her with a gentle smile.

"You're right... I owe you both an apology."

"And my deepest gratitude... for saving him... and for saving me."

"Then..."

Hope flickered across Athena's face.

Ashendra's smile slowly faded.

"I'm afraid... when my own curse was lifted, my magic vanished with it."

"No..."

Athena's voice faltered.

"Then... there's no way to break my curse?"

Ashendra lowered her eyes and quietly nodded.

"Just as mine was, your curse can be broken only by true love."

Ashendra looked gently into Athena's eyes.

"Tell me... is there someone you truly love?"

"Pharaoh..."

Ashendra slowly shook her head.

"No... that's only what you've convinced yourself you ought to believe."

"Is there truly no one else who comes to mind?"

Athena fell silent and lowered her gaze.

"Ashendra... even the one who cast the curse couldn't break it? And... who was it that cursed you in the first place?"

At that moment, Roy reached the entrance to the altar chamber.

"Athena!"

"Roy! Oh... you're alive!"

They ran to each other without another word.

Arm in arm, Pharaoh and Ashendra watched them with gentle smiles.

"Every last one of them... has failed me."

A man's voice echoed from behind Roy.

He raised one hand toward the heavens.

Instantly, a ring of fire erupted around Roy's feet.

The flames surged upward, twisting into the form of a giant serpent...

...and coiled tightly around his body.

"GAAAH!"

Scorching heat seared his flesh as the fiery serpent crushed his arms and ribs.

Bones groaned beneath the pressure.

Roy screamed in agony.

"I'll dispose of the nuisance first... Set."

Amenhotep stepped out from behind Roy.

"Amenhotep?! What are you doing?"

Unable to make sense of what he was seeing, Pharaoh stared at him in disbelief.

"He is the one."

Ashendra stepped forward, her eyes fixed coldly on Amenhotep.

"The one who sought your life... and the true mastermind behind the curse that was placed upon me."

"Apep... so it was you..."

Black mist swept across Roy's face once again, revealing Set's jackal visage.

"Well, well... my old nemesis, Set. Your divine power has always been the one thing I cannot withstand... so I'll dispose of you and your host together. Then I'll eliminate Pharaoh... and this world will be mine!"

Amenhotep clenched his fist.

The fiery serpent coiling around Roy tightened with brutal force.

His ribs cracked beneath the pressure. One broken rib drove into his lung, and blood frothed from his mouth.

"Stop!"

Athena broke into a sprint, reaching desperately toward Roy.

But he was still nearly ten yards away.

"Grandpa Ra! Remove the blessing of the curse... now!"

Ra peered out from beneath the hood of Athena's cloak.

"But if I do... there will be no turning back. Never again shalt thou walk this world as a human."

"Now!"

"You leave me no other choice."

At Ra's cry, Athena's body was enveloped in radiant light.

In an instant, she became a great white serpent.

She soared over Roy, landed before Amenhotep, and wrapped herself around him, crushing

him in her coils.

"Let him go!"

Athena tightened her coils around Amenhotep with all her strength.

"Y-You little—!"

"Let him go!"

A sharp crack rang through the chamber as Amenhotep's arm snapped, but Athena refused to loosen her grip. Instead, she squeezed even harder.

"GAAAH...! Damn you...! Enough..."

The fiery serpent released Roy and flowed back into Amenhotep's body before vanishing.

Athena immediately unwound herself from Amenhotep and hurried to Roy's side.

He had already lost consciousness and lay motionless on the stone floor.

Pharaoh seized his sword and charged at Amenhotep.

But the instant his blade struck the wall of fire Amenhotep had conjured, he was hurled backward and crashed onto the stone floor.

Amenhotep calmly picked up Pharaoh's fallen sword and approached with a faint smile.

Ashendra stepped in front of Pharaoh, spreading her arms to shield him.

Ra descended before her.

As he took the form of an old man, he raised one hand.

A roaring gust burst from his palm.

Unable to withstand its force, Amenhotep was driven to one knee.

"Curse you... Ra!"

"Enough, Apep. Must thou still persist? Dost thou truly not understand that ruling the world holds no meaning? It is not desire that saves the world... but duty."

"Silence! What could one who already possesses everything possibly understand? This world is mine... and I shall claim it!"

With that furious roar, Amenhotep's body erupted in dark flames, transforming into a colossal serpent with eight terrible heads.

"You've barely enough strength left to maintain your true form, have you? Do you really think a little sparrow can defeat me?"

Apep opened all eight jaws and unleashed a torrent of fire that swept across the entire chamber.

Ra reverted to the form of a sparrow and took to the air.

Ashendra threw herself over Pharaoh.

Athena coiled tightly around Roy, shielding him from the inferno with her own body.

"Athena... thank you."

Clutching his chest, Roy slowly rose to his feet.

Soft blue light shimmered from his hand, steadily healing his wounds.

"You'll pay for that, Apep."

Black mist swept across Roy's face once more, forming the jackal mask.

Set raised Amun-Ra's sword and shield, ready for battle.

"Empty threats! I'll finish what we started a thousand years ago... right here!"

With a furious roar, Apep unleashed a torrent of fire at Set.

Set raised his shield against the flames and drove forward, trying to break into Apep's guard.

But another head swung toward him, spewing fire once again and forcing him back.

"Hahahaha! It's hopeless!"

Set vaulted over Apep's sweeping tail, twisting through the air to evade the flames before slipping behind him.

Yet another of Apep's heads whipped around with terrifying speed and blasted him with fire.

"Return to the Underworld, Apep. Leave the human be."

Set called out as he leapt back to widen the distance between them.

"Hahahaha... I could say the very same to you."

"I warned you."

Set sprang over the torrent of flame Apep had unleashed with blinding speed and slashed across one of the serpent's heads.

The blade ripped through its eye.

The head shrieked in agony...

...but another lunged forward at once, spewing fire.

Set slipped behind Amun-Ra's shield, letting the flames wash harmlessly over it.

"Futile!"

Apep's roar shook the chamber.

Set lowered the shield just enough to lock eyes with his ancient foe, then tightened his grip on Amun-Ra's sword.

He began circling Apep. One head after another tracked his movements, each unleashing torrents of fire.

Within moments, the chamber had become a sea of flames.

Suddenly, Set vanished into the towering black smoke.

"You insolent cur!"

With a violent sweep of his tail, Apep swept the smoke aside.

"Above you, you idiot!"

Set came plunging down from directly overhead.

As he fell, he drove Amun-Ra's sword deep into Apep's back.

"GRAAAH!"

Apep's massive body convulsed and crashed onto the stone floor.

"What's wrong? Is that all you've got?"

"Damn you..."

One of Apep's heads suddenly turned toward Athena. The next instant, a torrent of crimson fire crashed down upon her, engulfing her entire body.

"No!"

Set rushed to her side at once. Kneeling beside her, he placed a glowing hand upon her as blue healing light flowed into her burned body.

"Hahahaha! Then die together!"

All eight of Apep's heads reared back and unleashed rivers of fire upon Set. Yet even as the inferno battered his back, Set never once withdrew his healing hand.

Athena's burns slowly faded beneath the blue light.

But she remained motionless...

...her eyes still closed.

The hand Set had placed upon Athena began to tremble.

"You..."

"I'LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU!"

Roy roared.

In the next instant, brilliant blue flames erupted around Roy and Athena, sweeping away Apep's fire.

"W-What... is that blue flame...?"

For the first time, Apep faltered.

""We'll never forgive you! ""

Roy and Set spoke as one from behind the jackal mask.

"Insolent fools! Die!"

Apep unleashed another torrent of fire.

But it could not pierce the blue flames surrounding them.

""It's useless, Apep. The fire of our fury burns hotter than yours...""

"Silence!"

Apep's jaws stretched impossibly wide as he poured forth an even greater inferno.

Roy calmly sheathed his sword and stood his ground as Apep's flames crashed over him.

Then he slowly lowered into a crouch.

In the next instant, he launched himself forward, tore straight through the inferno, and appeared before Apep in the blink of an eye.

Drawing his fist back to his waist, he gathered every ounce of his strength and drove it straight into Apep's face.

The serpent's head rolled back, its eyes turning white as it went limp and crashed toward the ground.

Without breaking his momentum, Roy spun and smashed a backfist into the second head...
...then whipped into a kick that sent the third head reeling before landing lightly on the stone floor.

One of Apep's heads lunged at Roy, its fangs snapping for his throat.

"I'll show you no mercy..."

Roy brought both fists crashing down upon the serpent's head, smashing it into the ground.

Without breaking stride, he sprinted up its fallen body toward Apep's massive torso.

Two more heads lunged to swallow him whole.

In one fluid motion, Roy crossed his arms, drawing Amun-Ra's sword from one hip and the divine hammer from the other. Then he unleashed a sweeping cross-strike, driving both heads aside.

The two remaining heads froze in shock and glanced at one another...

...then vanished before Roy could strike.

Looking down from midair, Roy saw Apep standing below once more in human form, glaring up at him in pure hatred.

Roy landed upon the stone floor and turned to face him.

"Are you ready...?"

"You insignificant wretches... How dare you speak to me like that!"

Apep's scepter flared with light, transforming into a radiant spear as he lunged at Roy.

Roy met every thrust with nothing but the hammer, effortlessly knocking each one aside.

"Why?! This... this cannot be happening!"

Terror filled Apep's wide, staring eyes.

Roy slid his sword back into its sheath. He slipped past the next thrust and caught the spear's shaft in one hand, yanking it toward himself.

As Apep stumbled forward, Roy's hammer rose to meet him. It crashed beneath his jaw, launching him onto his back as he tumbled across the stone floor.

"Enough... Well done, Roy."

Set's voice echoed quietly within him once more.

"Return to the Underworld, Apep..."

Resting the radiant spear upon his shoulder, Set hurled it toward his ancient foe.

"D-Damn you...!"

Apep thrust both hands forward in a desperate attempt to stop it.

But the spear pierced straight through his body.

The radiant weapon reverted to a scepter and clattered onto the stone floor beside him.

"The human still lives. His fate... I leave to you."

Without turning to face Pharaoh, Set spoke those final words.

Then the black mist faded from Roy's face.

The jackal mask was gone.

Pharaoh could do nothing but stare at them in stunned silence.

"Athena!"

Roy rushed to her side, lifting her gently into his arms and pulling her close.

Her ivory scales were cold to the touch.

Her eyes remained closed.

"Oh... Athena..."

He held her tightly against his chest as tears ran down his face.

"R-Roy... I can't... breathe..."

"Athena?!"

Roy immediately loosened his embrace and searched her face, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Her eyes met his, then she quietly turned away, her long body slipping from his embrace as though trying to hide herself.

"Thank you... but... I can't let you see me like this anymore."

Tears welled in Athena's eyes as she began to slither away.

"Wait!"

Roy hurried after her.

"This is the second time I've had to lose you... I can't bear to lose you again."

Roy knelt behind her and wrapped his arms gently around her as she lifted her head.

"You'll always be in my heart... I love you."

Cradling her head in both hands, Roy gently turned her to face him and placed a tender kiss upon the tip of her nose.

"Live... with me."

"Even... like this? Would you still want me by your side?"

"Of course."

Athena rested her head against Roy's shoulder. They held each other in silence.

Then her ivory scales began to shimmer with radiant golden light.

With the sound of shattering glass, a blinding light burst outward, and countless droplets of light rained across the temple altar like falling stars.

When the light finally faded, Athena stood once more in her true human form.

Their eyes met.

Without another word, they kissed.

"Bravo!"

Ra descended gracefully. As he touched the ground, his sparrow form shimmered and gave way to that of an old man. A broad smile spread across Ra's face as he applauded the two couples.

"Who could have imagined that this day would witness not one... but two miracles?"

His gaze moved from Pharaoh and Ashendra to Roy and Athena, shining with quiet delight.

"This is the most precious gift in all the realm of the gods."

Ra spoke quietly, and no one interrupted.

"Pharaoh... you overcame yourself and looked beyond the outward form to the one you truly loved. For that, I shall grant you this."

He placed a golden hand mirror into Pharaoh's hands.

"Ashendra must return to the Land of the Dead. Yet time flows differently there. While you spend a lifetime in this world, scarcely a month shall pass for her. Still... I know the loneliness such a parting will bring. Whenever you long to see her, simply call her name before this mirror, and it shall show you her face."

A gentle smile crossed Ra's face.

"My deepest gratitude."

Tears filled Pharaoh's eyes as he knelt before the sun god.

Ashendra quietly stepped to his side. She wrapped him in a loving embrace.

"Now then, Athena... you, too, have been blessed with true love and have finally found the answer within your own heart. Tell me... what wilt thou do now?"

"So long as I can be with him... I need nothing more."

"I see."

Ra's eyes softened.

"Then I shall bestow a blessing upon the children you shall one day have together. They shall be strong, long-lived, and untouched by sickness."

"My task is done. My pact with Roy has ended as well. I suppose it's time for me to return." Set spoke quietly.

"Indeed."

Ra gave a small nod.

"Ashendra... are you ready?"

"Yes."

Ashendra kissed Pharaoh one last time before gently wiping away his tears.

Ra brought his hands together with a sharp clap.

As he spread his arms wide, a radiant gate of light opened above the altar.

By then, Johnny had finally reached the altar chamber as well.

The Serpent King was reunited with his children.

Kashim twined his neck around his brothers', and the young serpents embraced one another at last.

Set emerged from Roy's body in his true divine form and began walking toward the gate.

His long black hair flowed to his waist, veiling his broad back.

"We'll meet again when your time comes, Roy..."

He came to a stop without turning around.

Raising one hand in farewell, he disappeared into the gate of light without ever looking back.

Ashendra held Pharaoh in a long embrace. Their fingers remained entwined until the very end before she quietly followed Set into the next world.

Ra closed the gate of light, resumed the form of a sparrow, and settled gently upon Athena's shoulder.

Surrounded by Johnny, the Serpent King, and his children, Roy and Athena embraced as they celebrated their hard-won victory.

The Goddess Athena

Pharaoh returned to the royal capital in triumph, where the sacred rite of coronation awaited him.

Yet beside the throne...

... the place reserved for his queen remained empty.

As Pharaoh raised the royal scepter toward the heavens, the clouds slowly parted.

Along the banks of the Nile, where the floodwaters had receded, fresh shoots of wheat emerged from the earth.

Standing quietly behind him, watching over both king and kingdom...

...Ra smiled.

As the cheers of the people echoed through the palace, Pharaoh stepped down from the ceremonial dais and returned to his throne, where Roy and Athena were waiting for him.

"Welcome, my friends. I am glad you came."

Roy and Athena knelt before him.

"Oh, enough of that. Please, rise."

Pharaoh smiled warmly.

"I asked you here for a reason. Roy... If you are willing, I would be honored to have you serve the crown as one of my closest advisers."

Roy glanced once at Athena before turning back to Pharaoh.

"If Your Majesty is willing to grant me one request... I wish to live as a sculptor... in her homeland."

"I see... That is a pity."

Pharaoh gave a small nod before turning his gaze to Athena.

"And as for you..."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Athena stepped forward.

"You are to return to your homeland... with him."

"But then... what of the alliance between our kingdoms?"

"It shall remain exactly as it is."

Pharaoh produced a sealed letter.

"Take this to your king."

Athena reached out to receive it, but Pharaoh drew it back with a faint smile.

"On one condition."

She looked at him in surprise.

"You shall be free to become betrothed to the man of your own choosing."

Only then did he place the letter in her hands.

"So long as I draw breath, Egypt shall never march against your kingdom... unless your people choose to invade ours first."

His expression softened.

"See that your brother understands that well."

With a gentle smile, Pharaoh entrusted the letter to Athena.

"One more thing..."

"What is it?"

Pharaoh turned to Athena.

"What became of Amenhotep?"

"Ah..."

For a brief moment, Pharaoh's expression grew solemn.

"He shall spend the rest of his life as a eunuch, laboring in the gold mines... in service to Egypt."

Hand in hand, Roy and Athena wandered through the festival celebrating Pharaoh's coronation, where they were reunited with Roy's master and the other apprentices.

"Welcome home, Roy."

The master rested a hand upon Roy's shoulder.

"Master... I..."

Roy lowered his head.

The master studied him in silence for a long moment.

"So... you're off to her homeland."

His voice was gentle, though touched with sadness.

The apprentices exchanged surprised glances.

"I'm sorry, Master. I want to build a life with her. And... I want to learn new forms of sculpture in her homeland."

The master smiled.

"You only get one life, lad. Live it the way your heart tells you to. Don't worry about the rest of us."

"Master!"

Athena threw her arms around him.

Chuckling softly, he pulled both Roy and Athena into a warm embrace.

"Do your best out there. But don't be strangers. Come back once in a while and lend these old hands a little help."

He laughed heartily.

Wrapped in the master's embrace, Roy and Athena smiled.

Roy devoted himself to sculpture, and above all to carving Athena. His works adorned parks, temples, palaces, and countless public squares. In time, he became celebrated throughout the Greek world as one of its greatest sculptors. Many of the goddess statues he created were placed upon the prows of ships as guardians of those who sailed the seas.

With her arm linked proudly through that of her beloved husband, Athena boarded one such vessel bound for Egypt.

Together with his former fellow apprentices, Roy later carved a colossal statue of Queen Ashendra to stand beside her tomb.

From that day onward, she watched over Pharaoh, over Egypt, and over the everlasting friendship between the two kingdoms.

Thus her statue stood through the ages, a lasting symbol of peace between the two kingdoms.

The End